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ABSTRACT

This paper describes black education during the Antebellum period and focuses on the efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau, philanthropic organizations, and the church to provide equal educational opportunities for blacks. It is pointed out that, before the Civil War, basic forms of education were provided to a few blacks by black and white ministers, benevolent slave masters, and free blacks. Through review of black educational development after the Civil War, it is shown that the establishment of free schools by the Freedmen's Bureau met with much resistance from whites, and that the only education available to blacks was provided in segregated educational institutions established by churches and philanthropic organizations. It is concluded that racial solidarity and self-help were major factors in the development of public school education for blacks in the South and in the border States. (EB)

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Literacy and Liberty: The Development of Public School
Education For Blacks During Reconstruction

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At the conclusion of the American Civil War the defeated South had suffered irreparable damage to its economy. White southerners faced two critical issues: first, how to rebuild their devastated society; and second, how to treat the emancipated slaves. The issue revolved around whether the ex-slave should remain ignorant and dependent, or educated and independent. The period from 1865 to 1877 witnessed the emergence of an elaborate scheme to deny the freedmen an important element in the struggle for human rights: namely, the establishment of the first system of free public education. There was little attempt to provide state support for black education in the South until the beginning of Reconstruction. In fact, once this educational process was initiated numerous barriers were erected to subjugate the education of ex-slaves. On the other hand, there existed a determined and concerted ethos among ex-slaves to avoid subordination and the bondage of ignorance. The primary objectives of this article will be two-fold: (1) to describe black education during the Antebellum period; and (2) to focus upon the efforts of the Freedmen's

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Bureau, philanthropic organizations, and the church to improve the status of black education during the Reconstruction era.

Education During The Antebellum Era

Education, in its broadest sense, may be defined as the shaping of mind and character. In the pre-war South two educational systems were developed to serve its clientele: first, private academies and prestigious state universities to cultivate the classical plantation Cavalier; second, the slave system of religious and moral training to cultivate the "Sambo" mentality. This training in the latter was intended as a major effort to produce submissive and obedient persons. The abolitionists and free blacks, however, desired to shift the focus away from total mastery over the lives of enslaved blacks, to the advocacy of liberty and full citizenship.

Despite stringent laws prohibiting a liberating education for blacks prior to the Civil War, some white and black ministers, benevolent slave masters, and free blacks provided basic forms of education for a few blacks. The existence of slave narratives, and the establishment of sabbath and riverboat schools provide partial data that some blacks were educated even though laws prohibited such. These laws were not strictly enforced. For example, during the Antebellum period Frederick Douglass received his first reading lesson from a benevolent white woman; William Wells Brown and Henry Box Brown were taught by their slave masters.¹

While some slave masters taught blacks to read the Bible in order to keep them submissive, few slaves adhered to this philosophy. As blacks acquired knowledge, the burning desire for liberty overshadowed subordination. A few blacks reported that most slaves did not want to hear how they were supposed to obey their masters; instead, they wanted to know how to obtain their freedom.²

Through the efforts of black and white ministers, free blacks received a rudimentary education. As early as 1818, for example, in St. Louis, a white Baptist minister established a successful school for the instruction of black children and adults in a church basement. At Wright City, Missouri, two black ministers built a church school for free blacks. Other black ministers took an active role in establishing church schools for blacks. At Hannibal, Missouri, Reverend Tom Henderson, a free black Methodist minister established a school shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War. Reverend John Berry Meachum, a black minister of the African Baptist Church in St. Louis, built a steamboat for the expressed purpose of teaching black children the three R's.

The education of free blacks was not confined to Missouri, but it was nationwide. For example, in Charleston, South Carolina, Daniel A. Payne, a free carpenter who became bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church maintained a school for free blacks. And according to two black historians, Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois, 32,629 free blacks were attending schools in the United States with

approximately 3,651 of those residing in the slave states.⁴

After blacks obtained their freedom in 1865, they worked toward a liberating education during Reconstruction with the assistance of the Freedmen's Bureau.

Black Education During the Reconstruction Era

At the state Constitutional Conventions held throughout the South, delegates passed laws providing for black education, but funds were not appropriated to build schools and to hire teachers. Consequently, the federal government created its own agency to oversee the educational instruction of blacks. In 1865, Congress passed a bill that provided for the formation of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. The bill stipulated that the Freedmen's Bureau would provide medical services and supplies for the freedmen, arbitrate labor disputes between ex-slaves and southern whites, manage lands in the defeated South, and establish schools. According to the black sociologist and historian, W.E.B. Du Bois, the greatest success of the Freedmen's Bureau was the establishment of free schools for blacks, and the conceptualization and advocacy of free elementary education for all classes in the South.⁵ Under the supervision of the Bureau, a variety of educational institutions for the benefit of the freedmen were created. These included day, night, Sunday, industrial schools and colleges. By 1867 schools had been established in some remote counties in the southern states. One historian, John Hope Franklin, stated that in 1870

there were 4,329 Bureau schools servicing 247,333 pupils.⁶

In certain areas of the South little or no facilities were maintained for black education. The few that did exist were insufficient. Freedmen's Bureau agents in Arkansas reported that accommodations at Helena, Pine Bluff, and Little Rock were inadequate, that none of the schools were furnished with writing desks, and that pupils sat on the floor while engaged in writing assignments.⁷ Workers located in the District of Columbia wrote that the building materials for black schools consisted of second hand lumber.⁸ At Charleston, South Carolina freedmen officials reported that no government buildings, land or other property was available for school purposes in that district.⁹ Although teachers in North Carolina came from the North to instruct blacks, the school-houses were "incommodious, uncomfortable structures, and rude and ill adapted to school purposes."¹⁰ And in the state of Texas, the workers reported that no school-houses for blacks contained two rooms or any facilities for instructing pupils. In some localities, they could not even rent a cabin to teach blacks.¹¹

Excerpts from letters by Freedmen's Bureau officials in 1865 revealed that the establishment of free public schools to educate the newly liberated slaves was not an easy task. In Louisiana, General Eaton reported that "he had many difficulties to contend with (and) prejudices to overcome in his districts in setting up schools."¹² Captain Orlando Brown of Virginia said, "his field had exceeding difficulty in establishing

schools due to the strong depression of the people."¹³ From Missouri, workers claimed that a majority of the southern whites opposed black education. "The opposition", they stated, "is so great that the teachers are visited, publicly and privately, with undisguised marks of odium."¹⁴

Summarily, early efforts to educate blacks generally met with resistance on the part of some whites who attempted to thwart plans to transform blacks from a condition of ignorance to a state of intelligence. In Georgia Freedmen's Bureau agents cited incidents of violence directed toward freedmen's schools. They stated that "in some places school houses were burned and the teachers were driven off; in others the teachers were insulted and abused, and the freed children stoned while on their way to and from school."¹⁵ According to freedmen workers in Louisiana "the hostility to colored schools was so great that many acts of personal violence and insight were committed on the teachers, school-houses burned and pupils beaten and frightened."¹⁶ When military forces withdrew from rural areas in the state, schools had to be discontinued for want of protection. The most demonstrative evidence of whites' negative attitude toward black schools was revealed in a riot in Memphis, Tennessee. Bureau officials estimated damages to school property at \$25,300. This did not include books, apparatus or the private property of teachers. As a result of this riot, twenty-five teachers were unemployed and twelve schools destroyed.¹⁷

Despite numerous attempts to prevent the development of free public schools in the South, the freedmen were more determined to obtain an education. Blacks turned to education with enthusiasm. The possibilities were seen as endless; enlightenment was seen as an alternative to degradation, insults, and racism. Black parents, it appeared, conceived that education would ameliorate the conditions of themselves as well as their children.

Few educational opportunities were available to blacks. The choice was one of segregated education or no education. The United States Congress set the precedent for establishing segregated institutions. In 1862, Congress passed a bill that required state officials to set aside ten percent of the taxes collected from blacks in order to provide public education for them.¹⁸ In Eyewitness: The Negro In American History, William L. Katz cites that ninety-nine percent of the schools in the South were segregated; nevertheless, black parents did not object because they felt that it was the only course of action in order to maintain their schools.¹⁹ The establishment of free public schools was seen by many blacks as an attempt to overthrow the southern caste system. Thus, segregation was generally accepted by blacks so that they could receive the only education available.

The church schools were examples of segregated educational institutions established in the black community. These institutions were deeply concerned with the shaping of mind and character:

- They provided numerous opportunities for social activities
- They furnished a setting for worship services
- They provided an arena for political rallies and debates
- They provided sabbath schools for children and adults
- They yielded opportunities for parishioners to read and interpret the scriptures
- They furnished training facilities for the musically inclined
- They encouraged academic achievements
- They established a platform for the development of community leaders .

During Reconstruction the establishment of church-schools served as an important institution for black liberty and literacy .

Catholics often opened their doors to blacks . Many taught blacks to read and write . By 1872, British Catholics began an active campaign in America in order to propagate Catholicism among blacks and to instruct them regarding the duties of citizenship . Nuns and priests, who were members of the Superior of St. Joseph's Apostolic Society of the Sacred Heart for Foreign Ministers from London, endeavored to educate and convert blacks in the midwest and eastern states.²⁰

The hierarchy of the Presbyterian sect exhorted that it was the synods and ministers' duties to instruct blacks so that they might obtain a common school education . They warned their membership that they could not expect the state and especially those who were governed by prejudice that had been engendered by the American slave system to do their part in ameliorating the illiterate condition of blacks.²¹

During Reconstruction the Methodist Church concerned itself with the education of blacks and played an active role in aiding freedmen in their new status. In Missouri, one bishop sent a circular to all of the church's affiliates informing each that the emancipation of four million black slaves opened their doors for mission and educational work. To educate the freedmen, the Methodist Church created a Freedmen's Aid Society which was designed to co-operate with its southern missionaries in their effort to build schools and to recruit instructors to teach blacks.²²

Private and semi-public education was made available through racial solidarity and self-help. Black individuals, church associations, and conferences provided funds to educate blacks. Some individuals donated as much as \$100.00 to aid black education. Many of these organizations sponsored fundraising drives, fairs, picnics, and dinners to build church-schools or sabbath schools.²³

Development of sabbath schools was important for instructing reading and teaching of the Bible. These schools were, in effect, the first institutions of black education. Every effort was made to establish such schools in every church. Resolutions, soliciting aid from the public, were adopted by one congregation in St. Charles, Missouri. These resolutions maintained that freedmen wanted to become good and useful citizens. While they held the public schools in esteem, they deeply felt the necessity of a more thorough moral culture for their children. And to this end they supported and encouraged the sabbath school, because they believed that virtue and intelligence were the only safeguards to

any people.²⁴

Other cities followed the pattern set by the black citizens in St. Charles. Reverend Moses Dickson of the African Methodist Episcopal Church wrote the white Methodist Sunday School Convention in Kansas City, and requested financial aid to establish black sabbath schools for the 1,500,000 blacks residing in Missouri. He explained that a large percentage of blacks did not have the privilege or access to Sunday School instruction and that in many areas of the state, they did not know how to obtain such privileges. Although he sought whites' financial support, he did not believe that blacks could benefit from integrated church services. In addition, he believed that blacks would best be served by establishing their own city, county, and state organizations.²⁵ And to this end blacks succeeded in establishing their own institutions throughout the South with the assistance of numerous philanthropic organizations. These organizations contributed money and hired teachers to instruct southern blacks. The American Missionary Association, Baptists Home Mission Society, Freedman's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and black and white denominational churches spurred the improvement of blacks. Between 1860 and 1900, these organizations and others funded approximately 260 institutions of higher learning for blacks and whites.²⁶ Because of the efforts of these organizations, the Freedmen's Bureau and the church, the status of black education greatly improved during the Reconstruction era.

In conclusion, it was not within the scope of this paper to delineate all facets of the development of public school education for blacks during Reconstruction. Rather, the objective has been to focus upon the efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau, philanthropic organizations and the church to provide educational opportunities for blacks. Reconstruction meant that blacks were given liberty, but denied basic civil rights. Presidential and Congressional policies did little to establish free public school education. Yet this inaction did not discourage the freedmen from pursuing literacy and liberty. Through racial solidarity and self-help the freedmen were able to provide the seeds of common school education in the South and the border states.

¹Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (New York: Pathway Press, 1941), pp. 88-90; John Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 62-63.

²Blassingame, The Slave Community, pp. 63-64.

³B. F. Brigham, "Negro Education in Antebellum Missouri," Journal of Negro History, XXX (1945): 414; Donnie Bellamy, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri, 1820-1860," Missouri Historical Review (): 224.

⁴Thomas C. Holt, Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 53; Carter G. Woodson, Education of the Negro Prior to 1861 (New York: Putnam's Son, 1915) pp. 237, 240; W.E.B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880 (New York: Atheneum, 1977), p. 638.

⁵W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folks in Three Negro Classics (New York: Avon Books, 1970), p. 234.

⁶John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 304.

⁷Senate Executive Documents, Freedmen's Affairs, No. 6, 39th Cong., 2nd Sess., Vol. 1, December 17, 1866, p. 29.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁰House Executive Documents, Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, No. 120, 39th Cong., 1st Sess., Vol. 12, May 26, 1866, p. 30.

¹¹Senate Executive Documents (Freedmen's Affairs) No. 6, p. 149.

¹²House Executive Documents, Message on the Freedmen's Bureau, No. 11, 39th Cong., 1st Sess., Vol. 7, December 18, 1845, p. 30.

¹³House Executive Documents, Message on the Freedmen's Bureau, No. 11, 39th Cong., 1st Sess., Vol. 7, December 18, 1845, p. 24.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁵Senate Executive Documents, Freedmen's Affairs, No. 6, 39th Cong., 2nd Sess., Vol. 1, December 17, 1866, p. 29.

¹⁶Senate Executive Documents, Freedmen's Affairs, No. 6, 39th Cong., 2nd Sess., Vol. 1, December 17, 1866, p. 75.

¹⁷Senate Executive Documents, Freedmen's Affairs, No. 6, 39th Cong., 2nd Sess., Vol. 1, December 17, 1866, p. 133.

¹⁸Horace M. Bond, The Education of the Negro in the American Social Order (New York: Prentice Hall, 1934), pp. 44, 50-51.

¹⁹William L. Katz, Eyewitness: The Negro in American History (New York: Pittman Publishing Corporation, 1968), p. ; Bond, The Education of the Negro in the American Social Order, pp. 53-57; Harry S. Ashmore, The Negro and the School (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1954), pp. 7-11.

²⁰St. Louis Daily Democrat, January 20, 1872.

²¹Jefferson City Missouri State Times, October 20, 1869.

²²Jefferson City Missouri State Times, December 7, 1866. Bullock, A History of Negro Education in the South, p. 19.

²³Vernon Lane Wharton, The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1947), p. 243; St. Louis Daily Democrat, June 24, 1868; St. Joseph Daily Morning Herald, August 19, 1870; Bullock, A History of Negro Education in the South, p. 27.

²⁴St. Louis Daily Democrat, September 8, 1869.

²⁵St. Louis Daily Democrat, August 5, 1872.

²⁶John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, p. 378; Henry Lee Swint, The Northern Teacher in the South (Nashville, 1941), pp. 3-15; Bullock, A History of Negro Education in the South, p. 19, 26-27.